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Author(s): Betty Gubert
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THREE SONGYE AND KONGO FIGURES

BETTY GUBERT

There is a small but significant collection of African art at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a division of the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library. The core of the collection was purchased from Raoul Blondiau, a Belgian, who acquired objects over the first 25 years of this century in what was then the Belgian Congo (Deacon 1981: 64-65); although many other regions of the continent are represented, the major part of the holdings comes from this area. In 1968, Colin Turnbull, Curator of African Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History, wrote in an unpublished survey of the collection that ". . . the quality of the Congo carvings . . . could easily by itself serve to illustrate the greatness of this civilization."

Theatre Arts Monthly, a periodical edited by Edith J.R. Isaacs, acquired the Blondiau collection in 1926, and about half of it, 500 pieces, was shown at the New Art Circle in New York from February 7 to March 5, 1927. The material had been purchased, in part, for a proposed Harlem Museum of African Art, which was "temporarily housed in the 135th Street Branch Public Library" (Locke 1936:111), and this library has evolved into the Schomburg Center. Today, 54 years later, the Center is the closest thing to a Harlem Museum of African Art, although its primary function is as a research library, and exhibition space is limited.

Three pieces in the collection are particularly noteworthy: two *manga* (sing., *buanga*) from the Songye in southeastern Zaire (Figs. 1, 2, 4, 5), and one *nkisi* from the Kongo in southwestern Zaire (Figs. 3,6). Figure 1 was shown in the catalog of the 1927 exhibition, and Figure 2 appeared in *The Arts*, February 1927. The *nkisi* (Fig. 3) apparently has never been published.

The *manga* illustrate most of the characteristic elements of Songye sculpture. They are male, and frontal in presentation. That they are not large (33.48 cm. and 33.02 cm.) indicates that they are for use by individuals, probably to guarantee fertility; larger figures, up to a meter in height, are used by the whole community for this purpose and for protection in such times of crisis as an epidemic or crop failure. The large head is strikingly balanced by the protruding abdomen, which may have a hole for medicinal substances and is further emphasized by the fingers splayed out on either side of it. The prominence of the head and stomach reflect the Songye metaphysical beliefs. The most important part of a human being is the *kikudi* (living spirit), which is reincarnated three or four times after the body's death. Where it is housed is not known, but the stomach and head are thought to be logical places (Merriam 1974: 111-22).

The forehead is typically high and rounded, and the cheeks are concave, tapering to a square chin or beard. The eyes are rounded and half closed, and may have cowries inserted (Fig. 2). The nose is a strong triangle, and the mouth may be a figure eight or some variation of it; Figure 1 shows a rounded mouth, repeating the curves of the carved eyebrows and eyes. The neck is elongated to hold strands of beads of clay, glass, or seeds. Legs are usually short and angular as are the shoulders, and feet are large, overhanging the small base.

On the face of the second figure (Figs. 2, 5) another common feature in Songye sculpture may be seen: copper banding. Copper and brass are frequently used on the face. In addition, nailheads may represent hair or form decorative elements on other parts of the body, such as the shoulders or chest (Cornet 1971: 240-47). This use of metal may impress upon the viewer the power and wealth of the owner as well as create an aesthetic contrast between the play of sunlight on the metal and the wood, which in Figure 2 is almost black.

Figure 1 displays an element uncharacteristic of Songye sculpture: the carving of the legs and base is as finished as that of the torso area. This is not usually the case, since the lower portion of the figure will be wrapped in strips of cloth, leather, fur, or fibers. The triangularity of the piece catches the eye; it is apparent in the nose, the carving of the beard, the knees, the genitals, and the spaces between the fingers and the toes as well as between the chest and the upper arms. Its very smooth, warm patina may be attributable to ceremonial usage or careful execution by the sculptor, or both. This *buanga* has a small hole (75 mm. by 50 mm.) in the back of the head, which is likely to have held a human tooth similar to the ones on its back, upper arms, and head. There is a slight crack on the crown. Deep cross-hatching on the head represents hair and is ornamented with circular bone discs, one of which is repeated on the stomach. These may act as stoppers to hold medicinal ingredients.

Figure 2 seems less finished, but it is also very smooth, and the head and the neck have been carefully thought out and worked. There are no cavities, however, into which ingredients may be placed. Cracks appear on the left side of the head and on the backs of the base and left arm. Cornet shows a figure with very similar facial features set into a basket or wrapping of fibers (Cornet 1971: 240). The examples at the Schomburg may have lost such wrappings as well as other accumulations (horns, beads, parts of animals and herbs) in their travels, or these accessories, which have been called "rubbish of all kinds" (Bentley 1900:256), may have been deliberately removed. It is also possible that the carvings, which are without traces of any substance such as blood, food or wine, were acquired by Blondiau or another European before they were used in any ceremony and are consequently unfinished.

Figure 3, a *nkisi* figure, is from the Kongo people; this group inhabits portions of Zaire, Congo, Angola, and Gabon. The description and classification of *nkisi* have been undertaken for 300 years by explorers and missionaries, and, lately, by art historians. J. Maes (1927,

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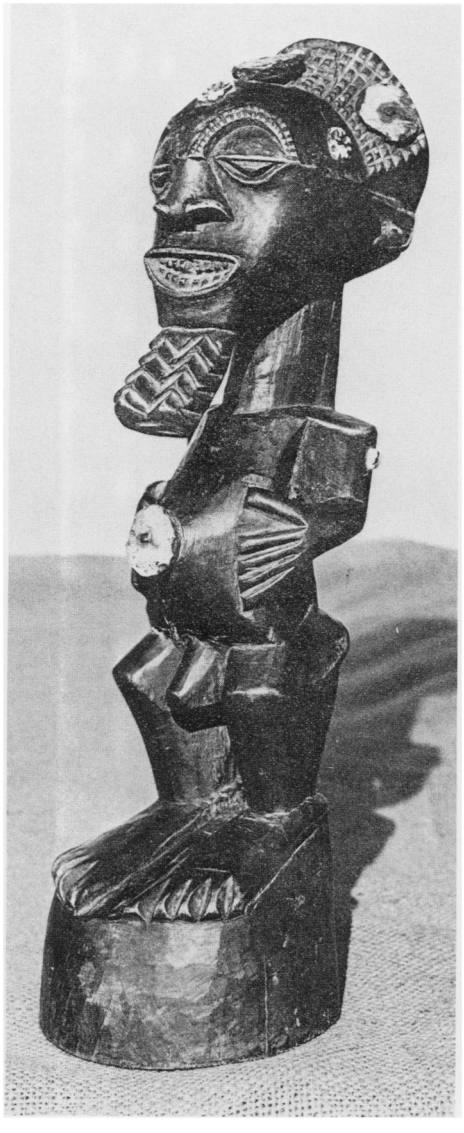

1. *BUANGA*. SONGYE, ZAIRE. WOOD, IRON TEETH, BONE, 33.48cm. EX-COLL: BLONDIAU-THEATRE ARTS.

2. *BUANGA*. SONGYE, ZAIRE. WOOD, COPPER, COWRIES, 33.02cm. EX-COLL: BLONDIAU-THEATRE ARTS.

3. *NKISI*. KONGO, ZAIRE. WOOD, FEATHERS, MIRRORS, RESIN, 33.02cm. EX-COLL: BLONDIAU-THEATRE ARTS.

1929, 1930 a,b) classified them into four groups: *Na Monganga*, the healing figures; *Npezo*, figures to cause illness; *Mbula*, figures to protect the chief against the power of the *ndoki*; and *Konde*, the famous nail-studded statues to punish troublemakers by inflicting illness (Volavkova 1972: 52, 56, 59). *Nkisi* is a generic term for a container and its contents used to effect change. In such charms the contents are more important than the container-figure; as Volavkova notes, there are many examples in the literature of *nkisi* being used for contradictory purposes, and " . . . one discovers very early that attributes and artistic features do not give unequivocal evidence for assigning a figure to any one of the groups." Therefore, without knowledge of the contents of this *nkisi*, it is not possible to classify it further.

This *nkisi* (33.02 cm. high, including feathers) is made of light brown wood, mirrors, and resin. The features have been modeled in a natural manner, with attention to the open mouth, nose, and ears. The expression is serene. The eyes are inset with mirror bits; black dots indicate the pupils. The torso is elongated, and the arms lie alongside the body in one unit. That the hands are not visible is rare because the arms, carriers of the gesture, help to indicate what the function of each particular *nkisi* will be (Volavkova 1972: 59). The legs are shortened and the knees are indicated roughly, but the feet show the same care given to the face, with toes and ankle bones delicately carved.

The entire torso is covered with a black resin box with a mirror at its center. The high crown, which balances the long, oval face, is also covered with resin and has varicolored feathers embedded in it. There is a small crack at the base of the back. This figure is also unusual in that there is a thick collar of resin around its neck, now partly cut away.

This type of sculpture is sold unfinished to a person who will use it to gain revenge, for example, or to cure infertility or illness, or to insure success in a business venture or safety on a journey. At this point it is of little value, "a wooden image that may be bought for a yard or two of common calico," but it can be made into "a strong fetish that will cost . . . forty to fifty yards, or even the price of a slave" (Weeks 1914: 233). To make the image effective the owner takes it to a *nganga*, a medical and/or spiritual advisor. Van Wing identified 150 such advisors who specialized in fertility, detecting thieves, and causing or ending an illness, drought or flood (1938: 122).

The *nganga* must call upon his knowledge of botany, psychology, and the dramatic arts to invest the figure with the power to effect the desired results. He

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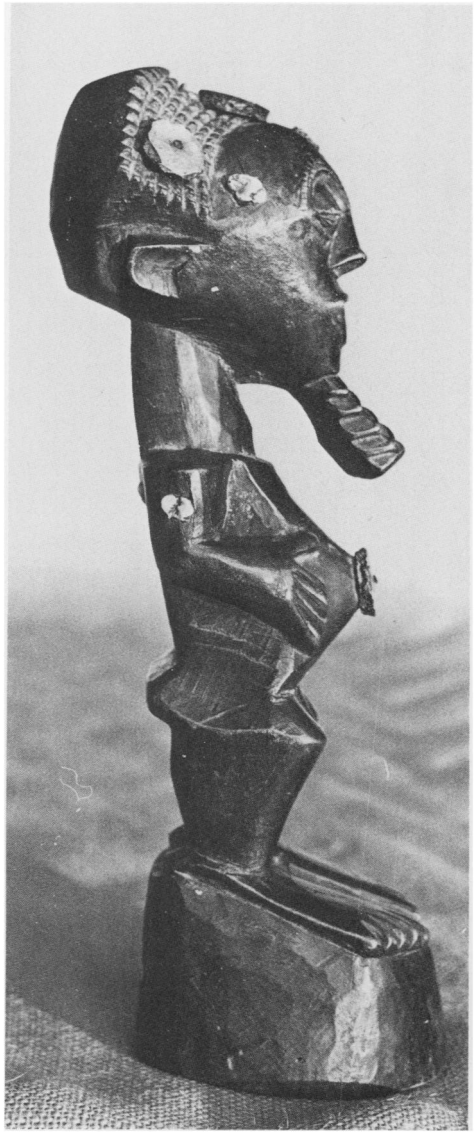

4. SIDE VIEW OF FIGURE 1.

5. SIDE VIEW OF FIGURE 2.

6. SIDE VIEW OF FIGURE 3.

may also complete the *nkisi*, following the aesthetic values of the carver. The objects that will fill the cavity are then selected from the three realms of nature: mineral, vegetable, and animal. From the first comes clay from a river bed where the spirits of the dead reside. Other elements are in keeping with the activity of the *nkisi*: herbs and roots that can kill or cure, and parts of animals, the latter being those that enable the animal to survive—claws, wings, teeth, horns—or that communicate strength or power.

After choosing the items, the *nganga*, in the traditional rituals at which his client is present, activates the figure. He may sing and dance around it or set off gunpowder to awaken the spirits near by. His assistants may sometimes accompany him on musical instruments. Ingredients such as animal blood, palm wine, chewed kola nuts, shells, beads, peppers, or feathers may be included in the ritual. The items selected are layered with metaphoric meaning easily read by the Bakongo, although to an outsider they appear to have been chosen at random. Rubin points out, "The tendency to multiply media in power contexts should probably be seen as intentional design-redundancy, calculated to organize a wide spectrum of systematic responses. Activation of transfer and concentration of energies is thus cumulative in intent as well as accumulative in aspect" (1974: 10).

Even though the ingredients in the carving must be powerful enough to effect change, it is perhaps an exaggeration to place these figures "in power contexts," as they are used at all levels of society. Their accumulations, however, can be very rich and varied for such small figures. If a *nkisi* does not produce the desired results, it may be necessary to undergo renewal rites, including a sacrifice. A stronger *nkisi* may be blamed for overpowering it, or it may be determined that the rules governing its use were not followed (Bentley 1900: 261).

These three carvings, among the finest in the Schomburg Center, have been on display for a number of years but are little known to art historians. Although the New Art Circle exhibition in 1927 received a great deal of publicity, no detailed study was undertaken at that time, nor has there since been any published work that has examined the Schomburg's major pieces, although a recent article in *African Arts* briefly surveyed its history and holdings (Deacon 1981). A half century after its acquisition, this early African collection is worth the attention of scholars for its quality and for the role it can play in the rediscovery of Afro-American cultural history. □

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Hamburg piece to my notice and to Dr. Zwernemann, of the Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde, for kindly providing information about it.

22. Strictly speaking we should refer to the broader type category "Euro-American," for an American Baptist Mission was established in Abeokuta in 1850. However, it is normal African practice to label all white men as Europeans.

23. In fact the cassock, if it is one, only reaches to the waist of the rider, who is wearing a pair of pajama-like trousers with red stripes. This may be the carver's solution to the technical problem of representing a full-length garment, which, in any case, would tend to ride up toward the knees in the straddle position. Moreover, the fact that this part of the carving would have been difficult to reach with knife or adze may also explain why the garment has been cut off short.

24. It would be wrong to place too much emphasis on the influence exerted by the missionaries (Ayandele 1966:340; Ikime 1977: 13-14; Smith 1969: 176), but there is little doubt that Townsend and Wood were political figures of some standing.

25. The carver may simply have subscribed to the convention whereby equestrian figures, which usually depict rulers or military leaders, are invariably portrayed holding in their right hands either a staff or some form of weapon (cf. the equestrian figure on the lower tier). A similar explanation may account for the striped trousers, which may be war trousers of the type known as *sokoto* (Smith 1967:101). According to Smith the flintlock pistol was introduced in the latter part of the 19th century mainly as a weapon for horsemen.

26. In the early days, until the novelty wore off, the arrival of a European in the town was treated as something of an occasion, as indicated by Freeman (Journal, Dec. 12, 1842; M.M.S. Notes 10, 1842-44: 382) and Townsend (Journal, Jan. 4, 1843; C.M.S. Record 14, 1843: 232).Freeman was actually the son of an African father and an English mother, but he regarded himself, and was certainly regarded by his hosts, as a European. Ironically, perhaps the arrival of the main party of missionaries under Townsend in 1846—his earlier visit, like that of Freeman, had been exploratory—received little or no public recognition because of a wrangle among the chiefs as to who should do the honors (C.M.S. Record 18, 1847: 57).

27. As Ayandele indicates (1966: 12), the Egba soon made it clear that they would resist any attempts to do away with indigenous customs that really mattered, such as burial rites.

28. For accounts of the *ifole* (housebreaking) and the events leading up to it, see Ajayi 1965: 201; Biobaku 1957: 79-84; C.M.S. Intelligencer 13, 1868; Kopytoff 1965:231-32; Pallinder-Law 1974: 68-71; Phillips 1969: 125-29. As Pallinder-Law (1974: 68-69) notes, Egba Saro Methodists, used to African leadership of their church, became the leaders of that section of the Saro community opposed to Townsend.

29. Townsend's departure from Abeokuta in 1876 was reported as being due to "ill-health" (C.M.S. Record 1 n.s., 1876: 375).

30. For further details see Ayandele 1966: 49-51, on which this account is based.

31. In 1885, following this clandestine visit, Fr. Holley died from a mysterious illness, Ogundipe having announced that he would pay dearly for his rashness (McLoughlin 1962: 11). One theory, supported by Fr. Coquard (Hales 1962: 14), himself a medical man, is that he was poisoned on Ogundipe's orders.

32. Early photographs of C.M.S. missionaries show them wearing black suits. I am most grateful to Rosemary Keen, Archivist of the Church Missionary Society, for this information.

33. If it is a type of hat known as a shovel hat (earliest known use 1829, Shorter O.E.D.: 1882), and the turned up brim and also the black band at the base of the crown suggests that it is, this might favor the Anglicans, for in Italy such a hat is known as *capello a larghe tese portato dal clerico anglicano* (Cassell's Italian-English, English-Italian Dictionary, 7th ed. 1972: 897). See Moorhouse (1973: pl. 23) for an illustration of an Anglican missionary in East Africa wearing a shovel hat. However, a similar type of hat is also affected by Roman Catholic priests (cardinals wear a red version) both in England (e.g., G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown) and in France, where it is known as a *chapeau d'ecclésiastique* or *chapeau romain* (Harrap's New Standard French-English Dictionary: 33).

34. McLoughlin reports that Ogundipe sent his "word-bearer" to welcome them (1962: 10), but whether or not horses were provided is not known.

35. If, as seems likely, the missionary appears as a power symbol (cf. Fagg 1963: pl. 82), the carver would almost certainly have felt himself bound by convention to portray him mounted, the horse being a potent symbol of wealth and prestige because of its relative rarity (Smith 1969: 123).

36. The mask referred to in note 2 was acquired by the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, in 1885. Even if Ojerinde was not the carver, the attribution confirms that he had a well-established local reputation by the 1880s.

37. These findings are supported by certain iconological aspects of the carving, which I hope to discuss at a later date.

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CONTRIBUTORS

T.J.H. CHAPPEL was Ethnographer with the Federal Department of Antiquities, Nigeria.

DANIEL J. CROWLEY, Professor of Anthropology and Professor of Art at the University of California, is a member of the *African Arts* consulting editorial board.

PERKINS FOSS teaches African and Afro-American art at Dartmouth College.

BETTY GUBERT is Head of Reference and Cooperative Services at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research division of the New York Public Library-Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

EIKE HABERLAND is an academic director at the Frobenius-Institut, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, whose principal area of research is Ethiopia.

DORA LAMBRECHT, a curatorial volunteer at the Arizona State Museum, The University of Arizona, Tucson, recently returned from a research expedition to the Florissant fossil beds in Colorado.

NANCY C. NEAHER is Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of the History of Art, Cornell University. She conducted doctoral research in Nigeria among the Igbo in 1974-75, receiving her Ph.D. from Stanford University in 1976.

DORAN H. ROSS is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and has done extensive fieldwork in Ghana and Brazil.

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NEAHER, *Notes, from page 55*

1. Fieldwork in the summer of 1978 was supported by a faculty research grant from Wayne State University. The author would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance of the following persons at various stages of this project: Ben Akunne, Hyacinth Uduezue, Boniface Udidibie, Sir Edmund Leach, Adrian Edwards, Mike Onwurah, and my husband, James Maas. Ideas presented are solely the responsibility of the author. Diacritical marks have been eliminated from Igbo terms to facilitate printing.
2. The 1973 census was suppressed by a former military regime, so accurate estimates will have to await a new count.
3. For details on Igbo social organization, see Uchendu 1965: 39ff; on Awka, see Dike 1975: 31ff.
4. Archdeacon Basden of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) lived on the western end of Awka for over 30 years. His publications yield abundant information on elements of local culture. Housebuilding is described in 1921: 165ff.
5. Polychrome paints were evidently applied to *mgbo ezi* at times. Since an investigation of color symbolism remains to be undertaken for the Igbo and since none of the panels seen by the writer was painted, such nuances in style will not be addressed here. It would be interesting to know whether Turner's classic interpretation of the Ndembu color triad (white, red, black) has relevance for traditional Igbo culture (1967: chap. 3).
6. A number of authors have followed Basden's lead in calling this "chip" carving (1966: 316). The writer hesitates to employ the term since it evokes the ancient Viking/Celtic decorative device of curved lines of V-shaped indentations on metal jewelry. In contrast, Awka patterns are quite varied. Recently, however, Boston has validated the term in African context in his exposition of a "chip" and smooth-plane style in northern Igbo sculpture (1977: 41ff).
7. There seems to be some variation as to who was entitled to display carved *mgbo ezi*, depending on the community and the chronology of field reports. At Awka, for example, the highest levels of *ozo* disappeared early in this century because of their exorbitant expense. Accordingly, panels signify the remaining upper rank of *ajahija*. For representative information on *ozo*, see Jeffreys 1931: 31, 1937: 367ff; Cole 1972; Dike 1975: 126, 152ff.
8. *Azu* means outside (Williamson 1972: 59). *Oji* refers to *iroko*. The panel also incorporated openwork zigzag patterns. At the installation of titled men in Awka, small planks may have helped to define relationships with maternal kin groups (Dike 1975: 152). Further inquiry should also help to clarify the significance of herm-like variants observed in the field and collected by Jeffreys (Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford.)
9. Uchendu gives a succinct analysis of Igbo beliefs in reincarnation (1965: 102).
10. See Thomas 1917: 164ff; 171, 173, 177, 182ff Western Igbo; Meek 1950: 179, 306; Jeffreys 1937: 24; Basden 1966: 137, 294.
11. Henderson's penetrating analysis of Onitsha *ozo* purification rites (1972: 247-66) gives coherence to a range of published data on *ozo* and corroborates specific points made by field informants.
12. See Aniakor 1978a: 46, 1978b: 212. Various Awka informants and H. Uduezue, Ethnographic Assistant, Federal Department of Antiquities, Nri (personal communication, Jan. 22, 1979), made comparisons in passing.
13. Jeffreys's article (1951) posits a direct connection with Egyptian precedents, no doubt inspired by the author's predilection for a Hamitic theory of African origins. For other material on *itchi*, consult Thomas 1913: opp. 75, 128; Basden 1966: 331-33; Onwuejeogwu 1974: 180, 208 fn. 5; on Awka, see Dike 1975: 155.
14. For a concise overview of Nri, see Shaw 1977: 94ff.
15. Boston (1977: 62) regarding *ikenga*, but the idea obviously has much wider application.
16. This idea was substantiated in personal correspondence with H. Uduezue, Ethnographic Assistant, Federal Department of Antiquities, Nri, Jan. 22, 1979.
17. For various sources, see Jeffreys 1957: 222; Okeke 1974?: 12-13; Basden 1966: 330; Oliver 1960.
18. Descriptions given in Ezekwe 1934: 31-32; Basden 1966: 222ff, 331; Okeke 1974?: 17-18.
19. Published studies of African body arts tend to emphasize aesthetic and social motives and to minimize or overlook apotropaic functions of scarification and body painting (Faris 1972; Paulme 1973; Cole 1974).
20. Today manufactured house paints have largely supplanted earlier colors made from chalks, charcoal, pulverized minerals, and vegetal sources.
21. Body arts inspire costume design in Africa and beyond. Consult Adams 1978: 33 regarding Kuba masking outfits. Another example of this kind of transformation is found in the popular Cuna Indians' cloth appliques, San Blas Islands, Panama.
22. See Aniakor 1978b: 74, 75, 201; Boston 1977: 76; Meek 1950: 62; corroborated by various informants.
23. For information on *ijele*, consult Boston 1960; Cole 1975: 115; and Aniakor 1978a.
24. To cite just one example, Panofsky's interpretation of High Gothic style as a direct manifestation of medieval Scholasticism's world view may be criticized for undue simplification of much more complex reality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CROWLEY & ROSS, *Notes, from page 62*

1. Thanks are due Ruth Lockwood for detailed research on the symbolization of the *orixás*. Cf. Raul Giovanni da Motta Lody, *Símbolos Mágicos na Arte do Metal*. Duque de Caxias, RJ. n.d. Research was sponsored in part by University Research Expeditions Program, University of California, Berkeley. The authors would like to thank Jean Colvin, Director, UREP, for her enthusiastic support of this project. All illustrated objects were collected in 1981 with the exception of the pestle/rattle, which was purchased in 1978.
2. Cf. Pierre Verger, *Dieux d'Afrique*, Paris, 1954, pls. 52, 118.
3. Robert F. Thompson, "Icons of the Mind, Yoruba Herbalism Arts in Atlantic Perspective," *African Arts*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 52-59, Spring 1975. Cf. especially figs. 8 and 9.
4. The Yoruba prototype for this rarely illustrated form is pictured in Robert F. Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, Los Angeles, 1971, chap. 11, fig. 3.
5. Cf. Thompson 1975, figs. 5 and 6; Paul Mercier, *Les Asẽ du Musée d'Abomey*, Dakar, 1952, and Verger, pls. 133, 151, 152.
6. Lúis da Camara Cascudo, *Dictionário do Folclore Brasileiro*, Rio de Janeiro, 1972 (1954), pp. 130-132.

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